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ABSTRACT

The "We the People...The Citizen and the Constitution" program is an instructional program on the history and principles of U.S. constitutional democracy for elementary, middle school, and high school students. At the high school level, classes may choose to enter a formal competition, advancing from congressional district and state competitions to national finals. The competition is structured as a simulated congressional hearing which tests students' knowledge of the United States Constitution. In spring 2000, to assess the impact of the program on student knowledge of and support for democratic institutions and processes, a survey was given to students (n=345) participating in the national finals competition. The survey instrument, consisting of 43 open- and close-ended questions, incorporated questions previously administered to high school seniors, college freshmen, and/or adults in various national surveys. The responses of the competition's students were compared to respondents' answers on the national surveys. Findings revealed that, as compared with various representative national samples, students participating in the national finals competition of the "We the People..." program possess more knowledge of U.S. democratic institutions and processes. Compared to a representative national sample of high school students surveyed by the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics assessment, "We the People..." students as a group are more knowledgeable about every category of civic education delineated in the survey. (BT)

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We the People… The Citizen and the Constitution
Knowledge of and Support for Democratic Institutions and Processes by Participating Students
National Finals 2000

SO 032 525

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Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary 2
II. Introduction and Purpose of Survey 4
III. Sampling and Methodology 5
Survey Instrument 5
IV. **We the People…** versus the National Assessment of Educational Progress 6
A. Knowledge of the General Rights of Citizens 7
B. Knowledge of State and Local Government 8
C. Knowledge of Political Systems, Parties, and Interest Groups 9
D. Knowledge of the Basic Structure and Functioning of the U.S. Government 10
E. Ability to Reason and Make Inferences from Text 11
F. Aggregate Comparisons 12
V. **We the People…** versus Adults: More Knowledge Questions 13
VI. **We the People…** and Monitoring the Future: Political Attitudes 15
VII. **We the People…** versus American College Freshmen 18
VIII. Student Feedback on the **We the People…** Program 20
IX. Conclusion 22

I. Executive Summary

The **We the People… The Citizen and the Constitution** program, administered by the Center for Civic Education (Center), is an instructional program on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy for elementary, middle, and high school students. The program is based on curricular materials developed by the Center and acclaimed by leading educators. At the high school level, classes may choose to enter a formal competition, advancing from congressional district and state competitions to national finals. The competition is structured as a simulated congressional hearing where students' knowledge of the Constitution is tested.

In spring 2000, a survey was given to students participating in the national finals competition of the Center's **We the People… The Citizen and the Constitution** (**We the People…**) program. The purpose of the Center's survey was to assess the impact of the **We the People…** program on student knowledge of and support for democratic institutions and processes. The survey instrument, designed by the Center, incorporated questions previously administered to high school seniors, college freshmen, and/or adults in various national surveys. The responses of **We the People…** students were compared to respondents' answers on the national surveys and the percentage of correct responses by **We the People…** students was then compared to the relevant national sample.

Students who compete in the national finals have received the most intensive exposure to the **We the People…** program. They have participated in all levels of the program and have shown remarkable mastery of the curriculum. Consequently, the Center polled these students to assess the impact of the program.

The findings of this study reveal that, as compared with various representative national samples, students participating in the national finals competition of the **We The People…** program possess more knowledge of American democratic institutions and processes. Compared to a representative national sample of high school students surveyed by the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics assessment, **We the People…** students as a group are more knowledgeable about every category of civic education delineated in the survey. In fact, **We the People…** students

outperformed nonparticipating students on every survey question. However, though there were specific survey questions where **We the People...** students performed remarkably well (several questions were answered correctly by over 90% of **We the People...** students), there was no single specific category where they particularly excelled. Instead, they seem to possess a more rounded knowledge of American civics and government. The two categories in which they performed best were knowledge of the general rights of citizens, and knowledge of the basic structure and functioning of the U.S. government. **We the People...** students also demonstrated their superior ability to reason and make inferences from text.

In a battery of five open-ended response questions derived from the American National Election Studies, 60% of **We the People...** students answered all five questions correctly, whereas only 16.5% of a corresponding national sample of adults scored similarly. **We the People...** students also outscored the original American National Elections Studies sample, whose respondents ranged in age from 18 to over 80 years, by 28%.

Various longitudinal studies have shown that political interest and support is declining among America's youth (Sax, Astin, Korn and Mahoney, 1997). The Center's study found that students who participate in the national finals competition of the **We the People...** program show less cynicism toward facets of American politics and government than a corresponding national sample of students possessing similar socio-demographic qualities. In addition, compared with a representative national sample of college freshmen, **We the People...** students place more importance on keeping track of political affairs, influencing the political structure, community leadership, helping others in difficulty, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life. From these findings, the Center infers that students who participate fully in the **We the People...** program are more likely than nonparticipating students to become active, engaged, and compassionate citizens, as well as to develop a greater propensity to show support for democratic institutions and processes.

II. Introduction and Purpose of Survey

The **We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution (We the People...)** program, administered by the Center for Civic Education, is an instructional program on the history and principles of American constitutional democracy for elementary, middle, and high school students. The program is based on curricular materials developed by the Center and acclaimed by leading educators. Simulated congressional hearings, excellent for performance assessment, are built into the curriculum. At the high school level, classes may choose to enter a formal competition, advancing from congressional district and state competitions to the national finals. The competition is structured as a simulated congressional hearing where students' knowledge of the Constitution is tested. During the past 14 years, more than 82,000 teachers have taught more than 26,500,000 students the **We the People...** curriculum. In 2000, 2 million students participated in the program.

Past studies have shown that students who used the curriculum "significantly outperformed comparison students" on every topic studied (ETS studies 1988, 1990, 1991). For example, a random sample of 900 high school students who studied the **We the People...** curriculum outperformed 280 college sophomores and juniors enrolled in political science courses at a major university. The **We the People...** students excelled in every topic area and on almost every test item (ETS). Another study found that **We the People...** high school students develop a stronger attachment to political beliefs, attitudes, and values essential to a functioning democracy than most other students and adults (Brody 1993).

In 2000, a survey was given to students participating in the national finals competition of the Center's **We the People...** program. The survey was designed to assess the impact of the program on student knowledge of and support for democratic institutions and processes. Students who compete in the national finals have, as a whole, participated in all levels of the program and have shown remarkable mastery of the **We the People...** curriculum. Consequently, the Center's survey is designed to measure the impact of the program on these students.

III. Sampling and Methodology

Each spring, the Center for Civic Education conducts the national finals competition for 51 classes, one from each state and the District of Columbia, in Washington, D.C. Most, but not all, of the participating classes won their state competitions and earned the right to compete at the national finals. The classes studied the Center's *We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution* text to prepare arguments for these simulated congressional hearings. Twenty-one of the 51 classes that competed at the 2000 national finals were randomly selected to participate in the survey (N=345). Teachers administered the survey in classrooms in a test setting during May and June. Most students, but not all, completed the survey after the national competition.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was designed by the Center to measure political knowledge and support for democratic institutions and processes, as well as to canvass students for feedback on the program itself. The survey consists of 43 open- and close-ended questions (see Attachment A), called from previous national surveys. All questions on the Center survey have been used by at least one national survey and administered to high school seniors, college freshmen, and/or adults. For this study, responses of **We the People...** students were compared to respondents' answers on the appropriate national survey. This report compares the percentage of correct responses by **We the People...** students with those of the relevant national sample. It should be noted, however, that **We the People...** students represent a select sample but, for the majority of our analyses, we compare them to the representative national sample. This year, the survey also contained two open-ended response questions where student feedback was sought on their experiences with the program.

IV. We the People... versus NAEP

Political knowledge is a prerequisite for engaged citizenship and political participation, as citizens must possess enough knowledge to effectively and responsibly participate in the political process. Previous studies have shown that young adults are less knowledgeable politically than older adults (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996:159), but both groups have demonstrated themselves to be ignorant of many facts about American government (Niemi and Junn, 1998:9). However, our survey results from the **We the People...** civic education program indicate that program participants are on their way to becoming informed, engaged, and politically active citizens.

Questions 1-23 of the **We the People...** survey are designed to measure levels of political knowledge. They are taken from public-release questions from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment that evaluated student knowledge and understanding of the U.S. government and politics. NAEP is an ongoing, congressionally mandated project sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. The project works to assess the educational achievement of American students in a variety of fields, including civics. The 1998 NAEP civics assessment surveyed 7,763 twelfth grade students. The sample is statistically representative of the entire nation.

The percentage of correct responses of **We the People...** students were compared to those in the nationally representative sample of high school senior responses from the 1998 NAEP assessment. As noted earlier, the **We the People...** sample represents an elite group of students (those who advanced to the national finals competition) whereas NAEP is a representative sample (hereafter in this section called the national sample).

The questions were broken down into five categories each of which address knowledge of a specific area of civic education: the general rights of citizens; state and local government; political systems, parties, and interest groups; basic structure and functioning of the U.S. government; and the ability to reason and make inferences from text. The percentage of correct responses by **We the People...** students and the national sample are compared below across each category. However, it should be noted that on

every question, **We the People...** students outscored the national sample—in several questions the difference amounted to over 40 percentage points.

A. *Knowledge of the General Rights of Citizens*

In each of the five questions that address the general rights of citizens, **We the People...** students outscored the national sample by an average of 24%. The largest percentage difference in correct responses came from a question that required students to recognize that the Supreme Court's power to overturn unconstitutional laws is an example of how the U.S. government attempts to limit the power of majorities. While 75% of **We the People...** students answered this question correctly, only 30% of the national sample did so. Additionally, 93% of **We the People...** students knew that the Framers of the Constitution wished to limit the power of majorities in order to protect the rights of individuals and minorities, compared to just 72% of the national sample. On two questions concerning critical understanding of both the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Article 22 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, **We the People...** students outscored the national sample by twelve and twenty-nine percentage points, respectively.

Knowledge of General Rights of Citizens (percentage correct)	**WTP**	**NAEP**
Political attitudes have changed regarding the role government should take in defending the health and safety of workers	70%	61%
The Supreme Court's power to overturn unconstitutional laws is an example of U.S. government's limit on majorities	75%	30%
Limiting the power of majorities protects the rights of individuals and minorities	93%	72%
The 1st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and Article 22 of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, show a common concern for individual rights	88%	76%
The U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been opposed by some Americans because of fear that international agreements will force the U.S. to act in ways not consistent with its national interest	77%	48%
Average Correct Response	81%	57%

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B. *Knowledge of State and Local Government*

We the People… students outscored the national sample by approximately 20% on four questions regarding knowledge of state and local government. While both groups were fairly skilled at making an inference from a graph regarding the reason why local governments employ more people than do state or federal governments (89% and 83%, respectively), the most significant difference in scores resulted from two questions based on a map of the congressional districts of Louisiana. Students were asked to infer information based on the map, which 87% and 79%, respectively, of the **We the People…** students did correctly, whereas only 59% and 47%, respectively, of the national sample responded correctly. Both groups, however, had difficulty recognizing that the Louisiana state legislature was most likely the government body responsible for drawing the map, with only 66% of **We the People…** students and 53% of the national sample responding correctly (see Appendix A, question 21). This category represents the highest average score for the national sample and the second highest for **We the People…** students.

Knowledge of State and Local Government (percentage correct)	**WTP**	**NAEP**
Local governments employ more people than do state or federal because they meet the direct needs of many people in many places	89%	83%
State legislature determines congressional district boundaries	66%	53%
A substantial increase in state population is likely to change the number of state congressional districts	87%	59%
A congressional district occupying a relatively small area may indicate that it includes a large urban area	79%	47%
Average Correct Response	80%	61%

C. *Knowledge of Political Systems, Parties, and Interest Groups*

Questions regarding political systems, parties, and interest groups represent a fairly diverse set of questions on our survey, and the wide variability in correct responses reflects this diversity. For example, for **We the People...** students, the highest score as well as one of the lowest scores for this section of the survey occurred on questions in this category. In fact, 98% of **We the People...** students and 90% of the national sample were able to identify the American Association of Retired Persons as an interest group that would be concerned about the Social Security program. However, in a series of three questions regarding two types of electoral systems—the single-member district and proportional representation—**We the People...** students did not score nearly as well, though they still scored significantly higher than the national sample. Some of the difficulty for both **We the People...** students as well as the national sample may come in the formatting of the questions which required that respondents apply their knowledge of the electoral systems to justifications for each system, rather than basing the questions merely on simple facts. Regardless of the reason for the poorer scores, 64%, 58%, and 53% of **We the People...** students, respectively, correctly responded to each of the three questions, while only 46%, 39%, and 40%, respectively, of the national sample did so. Additionally, **We the People...** students outscored the national sample on a question involving events at the Constitutional Convention. While 89% of **We the People...** students knew that the Connecticut Compromise declared that Congress would have two houses, one in which state representation was based on population and one in which all states had equal representation, only 55% of the national sample were able to answer this question correctly.

Knowledge of Political Systems, Parties and Interest Groups (percentage correct)	**WTP**	**NAEP**
The national interest group American Association of Retired Persons would be most concerned about severe cutbacks in the Social Security program	98%	90%
Countries with proportional representation systems tend to have more political parties than those with single-member district winner because they do not have to win a majority of the vote	64%	46%
In proportional representation systems, the legislature is more representative of the popular vote, therefore it is better than a single-member district system	58%	39%
The best argument in favor of single-member district systems is that voters should make choices about individual candidates, rather than choose parties	53%	40%
The Connecticut Compromise declared that Congress would have two houses, one in which state representation was based on population and one in which all states had equal representation	89%	55%
Average Correct Response	72%	54%

D. *Knowledge of the Basic Structure and Functioning of the U.S. Government*

Three questions tested knowledge of the basic structure and functioning of the United States government. While **We the People…** students performed remarkably well on one of them (ninety-four percent correctly responded that the Bill of Rights was primarily designed to limit the power of the federal government, compared to just 65% of the national sample) they did not fare as well on the other two questions, though still greatly outscored the national sample. Sixty-one percent of **We the People…** students correctly answered a question about U.S. foreign policy compared to 45% of the national sample. Additionally, 63% of **We the People…** students, versus only 31% of the national sample knew that most bills introduced in the House of Representatives are never sent by committee to the full House. On average, the difference between participants and the national sample was 26%.

Knowledge of the Basic Structure and Functioning of the U.S. Government (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP
While Congress and the courts have some authority over foreign policy, the president and the state department have the most authority	61%	45%
The primary purpose of the Bill of Rights was to limit the power of the federal government	94%	65%
Most of the bills introduced by the House of Representatives are never sent by committee to the full House	63%	31%
Average Correct Response	73%	47%

E. *Ability to Reason and Make Inferences from Text*

The greatest percentage difference in correct responses, by category, between **We the People...** students and the national sample came from those questions designed to test the ability to reason and infer from text. **We the People...** students outscored the national sample in this section by 27%. On two questions testing understanding of a 1941 quote by Judge Learned Hand, 89% and 88%, respectively, of **We the People...** students answered correctly compared to just 69% and 59%, respectively, of the national sample. Likewise, while only 55% of the national sample demonstrated understanding of a John Locke quote, 78% of **We the People...** students recognized its meaning. Several questions referred to a 1905 Supreme Court case, *Lochner v New York*. Three questions asked students to reason and infer from excerpts of the majority opinion of the Court and Justice Harlan's dissenting opinion. On all three questions, the national sample failed to score above 35%, while **We the People...** students scored 72%, 57%, and 52%, respectively. These questions reflected students' ability to understand the effect of the Supreme Court's decision in *Lochner*, as well as to understand the meaning of Justice Harlan's dissenting opinion.

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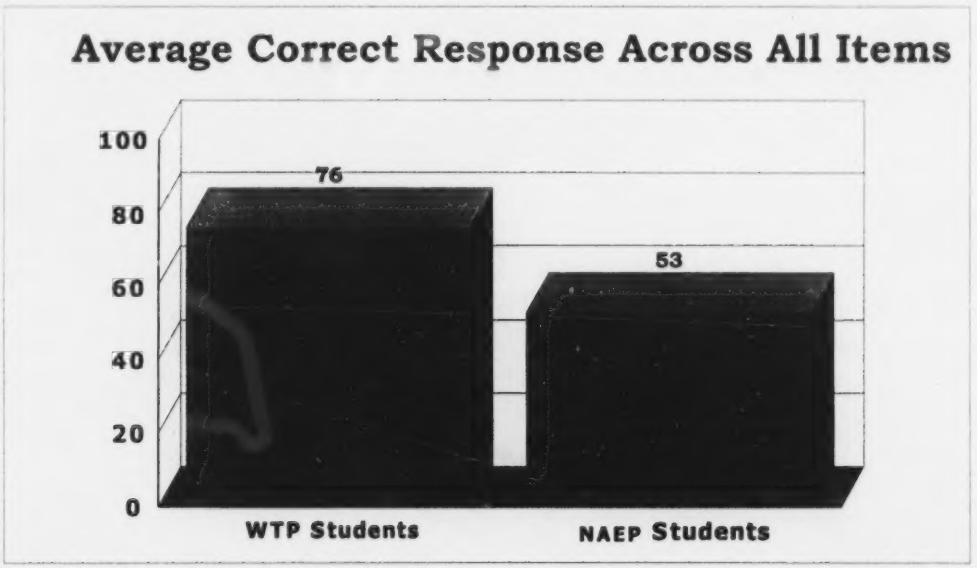
Ability to Reason and Make Inferences from Text (percentage correct)	WTP	NAEP
'Individual liberties depend on citizens committed to the protection of those liberties' best summarizes Judge Learned Hand's argument about constitutional democracy in the United States	89%	69%
Judge Learned Hand believed it was most important that citizens protect their freedoms through political participation	88%	59%
'Government power should be limited' is most consistent with John Locke's statement about "absolute arbitrary power"	78%	55%
The law limiting the number of hours people could work was ruled unconstitutional in the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Lochner v New York*	72%	30%
The argument that supports the majority decision in the case of *Lochner v New York* is that government should play as small a role as possible in civil society and the economy	57%	25%
'Peckham argues for judicial activism to limit government power; Harlan argues for judicial restraints, but for a more active role by government' is the best way to summarize the difference between the two opinions	52%	35%
Average Correct Response	73%	46%

F. *Aggregate Comparisons*

Across all the civic education knowledge-based categories, **We the People...** students scored, on average, 23% higher than the NAEP national sample. The average of correct responses in the NAEP sample was 53%, and for **We the People...** finalists the average was 76%. Eighty-two percent of participants outperformed nonparticipants by scoring above 12 out of 23 questions.



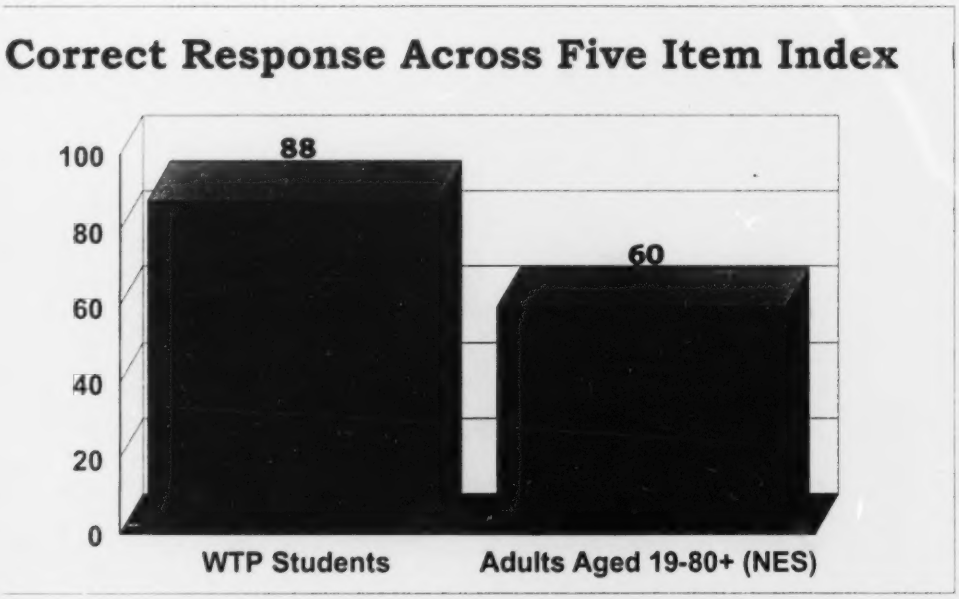
V. We the People... versus Adults: More Knowledge Questions

Five open-ended questions on the **We the People...** survey were derived from the American National Election Studies (ANES), a collection of national surveys conducted annually since 1952. Funded by the National Science Foundation, ANES are designed to present data on issues such as Americans' enduring political positions, social and political values, and participation in political life. Each study contains information from interviews conducted with 1,000 to 2,000 respondents, aged 18-80+. The samples are representative of the major regions of the contiguous United States as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The open-ended questions were chosen because, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1989: 304-306) suggest that this five-item index has strong construct validity and is an excellent measurement with which to gauge political knowledge. Responses of **We the People...** students were compared to the 1991 NES sample. Students in the **We the People...** program outscored the national sample on all five questions.

Five Item Knowledge Index (percentage correct)	WTP	1991 NES (age 18- 80+)
What job or political office is held by Al Gore	96%	74%
Judicial review	95%	66%
Veto override percent	84%	34%
Party control of the house	79%	68%
Party ideological location	85%	57%
Average Correct Response	88%	60%

ANES respondents ranged in age from 18 to over 80 years while **We the People...** students, on average, are roughly 18 years old. Overall, **We the People...** students outperformed the national sample from the American National Election Studies by an average of 28%.

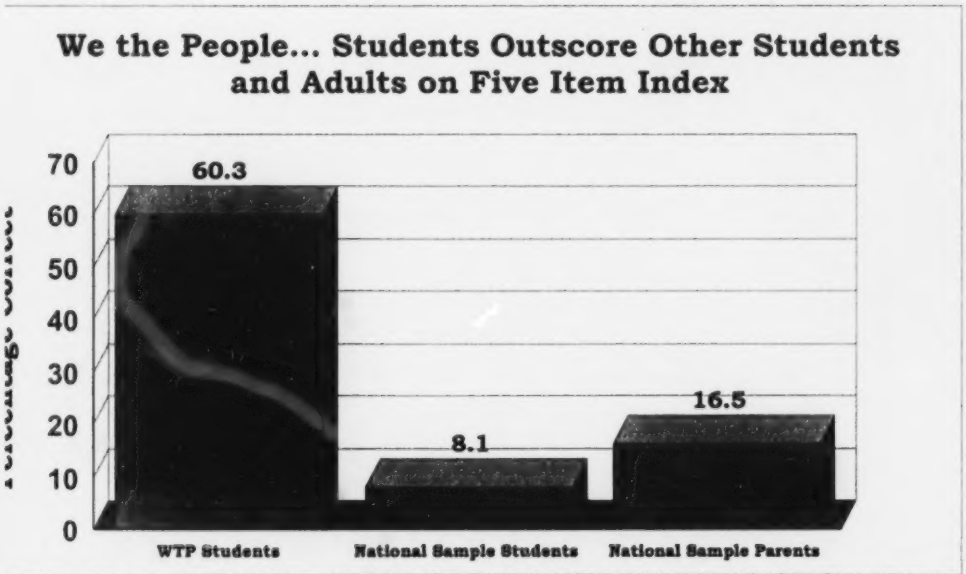


These same five questions were asked of 9th-12th grade students, and their parents in 55,708 randomly selected households for the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES). NHES is a large national study of adults and youth conducted by Westat for the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. The results were reported in Niemi and Chapman's *The Civic Development of 9th-12th Grade Students in the United States: 1996.*

Comparing the number of questions answered correctly by **We the People...** students, 9th-12th grade students, and their parents, **We the People...** students easily outperform the other students (some of whom may be younger), but more impressively, they outperform the adults.

Correct answers Range 0 to 5	**WTP students (mostly 12th grade)**	**9th-12th grade students, from the NHES**	**NHES parents**
0 correct	2.3%	24.2%	16%
1 correct	.6%	24.9%	15.7%
2 correct	2.6%	16.5%	16.2%
3 correct	5.8%	14.8%	16.8%
4 correct	24.8%	11.5%	18.8%
5 correct	60.3%	8.1%	16.5%

In fact, 60.3% of **We the People...** students answered all 5 questions correctly while only 8.1% and 16.5%, respectively, of the national sample of high school students and their parents did so. **We the People...** students dramatically outperformed the student and adult national samples.



VI. We the People... and Monitoring the Future: Political Attitudes

Questions 24-28 and 31 of the **We the People...** survey were designed to measure students' attitudes toward American politics. The questions come from *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth* (MTF) as part of a 1997 survey administered to approximately 16,200 high school seniors. Begun in 1975, the MTF annual surveys explore changes in values, behaviors, and lifestyle orientations of contemporary American youth. MTF is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Of the **We the People...** students surveyed, over three-quarters identified themselves to be white, while approximately two-thirds responded that they intended to go to college or college and graduate school. Because the vast majority of national finalists are white and college bound, we compared them to white, college-bound respondents of the MTF survey (N=917).

The questions measure cynicism by addressing a number of different facets of American politics. Across all five questions, **We the People...** students responded with less cynicism than the white, college-bound national sample of students. For example, when asked whether government officials are crooked/dishonest, 62.8% of the national sample thought that all or a majority are crooked or dishonest while only 23.5% of **We the People...** students responded similarly. Though both groups were somewhat similarly confident in government leaders' abilities, **We the People...** students expressed

more confidence than the corresponding national sample. **We the People...** students also report higher levels of trust that the federal government is "doing what is right" some or a majority of the time. The largest difference in responses concerned opinion of government spending of tax money. Only 16.5% of **We the People...** students, versus 62.2% of the national sample, thought that most or all of tax money is wasted.

	WTP	MTF
All or most people running the government are crooked or dishonest.	23.5%	62.8%
Very or somewhat confident that people running the government know what they are doing	67.3%	60.2%
All or most tax money is wasted.	16.5%	62.2%
Can trust government in Washington to do what is right all or a majority of the time.	46.7%	33.3%
Government is mostly run for the benefit of all people	19.5%	13.1%

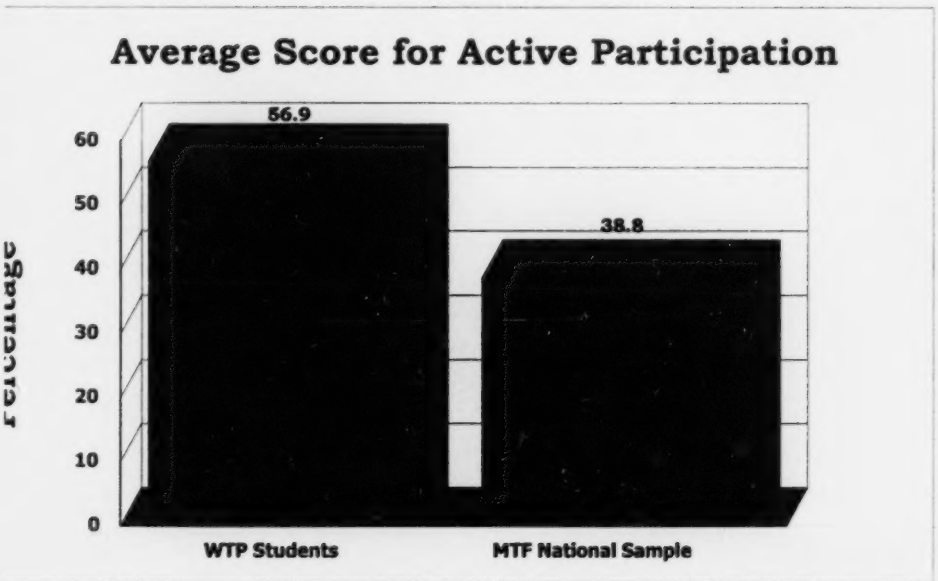
Differences between students is highly significant at Pearson Chi-square $p<.001$

When asked whether government is run for a few big interests or for the benefit of all people, more **We the People...** students felt that the government is run always or mostly for the benefit of the people, but this was still the area where **We the People...** students displayed the most cynicism. Over a third of both **We the People...** students and the national sample agreed with the statement that "government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." Students in general are less cynical than adults; seventy percent or higher of adults agreed with the statement in annual surveys from 1990-97.

We the People... students and students in the national sample were questioned regarding their intent to participate in certain political activities, such as registering to vote, donating to a political candidate or cause, working in a political campaign, participating in a lawful demonstration, and boycotting products or stores.
We the People... students were more likely than students in the national sample to declare that they "will" participate in any given political activity. In virtually all of the measures questioned, **We the People...** students were significantly more likely than white college-bound students in the national sample to declare that they will or already have participated.

WTP MTF

Will or have already registered to vote	96.8%	95.6%
Will or have already written to a public official	60.9%	43.6%
Will or have already donated to a political candidate or cause	33.0%	18.8%
Will or have already worked in a political campaign	40.8%	14.6%
Will or have already participated in a lawful demonstration	57.1%	25.8%
Will or have already boycotted certain products or stores	52.7%	34.1%
Average participation score	56.9%	38.8%



While nearly all students in both groups said that they have or will register to vote, differences emerge in other types of political activity. A larger percentage of **We the People...** students have contacted or will contact public officials or donate money. The most striking difference is that 40.8% of **We the People...** students reported having worked or being willing to work in political campaigns, compared to just 14.6% of the national sample. Also, over half of the **We the People...** students have participated or will participate in a lawful demonstration, compared to only a quarter of the national sample.

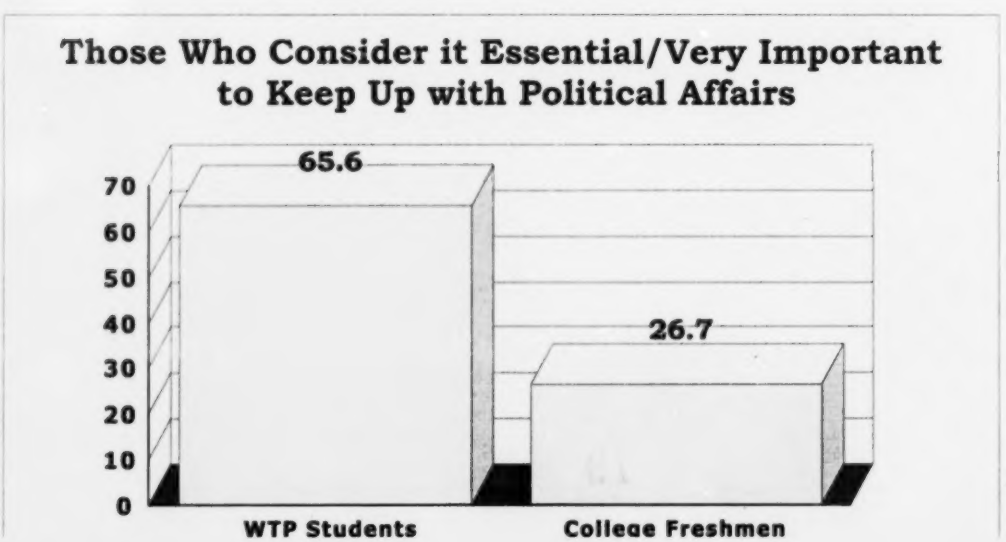
Over 62% of **We the People...** students report having " a lot" or "a very great interest" in government and current events, and almost half, 49%, discuss politics frequently. What emerges is a portrait of program participants as a politically informed and active group. These findings indicate that **We the People...** students are politically engaged, in contrast to reports of the political disengagement of American youth.

VII. We the People... versus American College Freshmen

The Higher Education Research Institute at University of California, Los Angeles publishes an annual report entitled, *American Freshmen: National Norms*. These reports are based on surveys of freshmen attending colleges and universities as first-time, full-time students. The data shown below are from the **We the People...** sample and from the thirty-second *American Freshmen: National Norms* report published in December 1997. The survey encompassed 252,082 students at 464 of the nation's two and four year colleges and universities, and the data are adjusted by the Higher Education Research Institute to reflect the responses of the 1,610,000 first-time, full-time students entering college in fall 1997. These survey questions have been asked for many years and thus allow researchers to capture trends among American young adults.

As shown by the *Freshmen* surveys, political interest is on a decline in the American young adult population. It is encouraging that, according to the Center survey, participants in **We the People...** program conceived of citizenship as active and engaged.

In 1966, "keeping up to date" with political affairs was considered very important or an essential life goal by 57.8% of students nationwide. Today, that has dropped to an all-time low of 26.7% of students. Additionally, in 1997, only 16.7% of American college freshmen responded that it was very important or essential to influence the political structure.



In order to be an effective citizen, keeping abreast

of political affairs, in conjunction with knowledge of politics, is important. Without these skills, citizens are not able to fully understand the political issues affecting their lives, nor are they able to effectively promote change. Seventy-three percent of **We the People...** students found it imperative to keep abreast of political affairs, and 57.7% thought it very important or essential to influence the political structure.

Objectives Considered to be Essential or Very Important	WTP	Freshmen
Keep up to date with political affairs	73.1%	26.7%
Influence the political structure	57.7%	16.7%
Be very well off financially	54.5%	74.9%
Develop a meaningful philosophy of life	86.3%	40.8%
Become a community leader	51.9%	31.2%
Help others who are in difficulty	86.4%	61%

Compared to American freshmen nationally, **We the People...** students place less value on wealth and place more importance on developing a meaningful philosophy of life, becoming a community leader, and helping others in difficulty. **We the People...** students have a positive attitude toward political institutions. For instance, 52.1% think that Congress is doing a good or very good job.

VIII. Student Feedback on the We the People... Program

For the first time on our survey, we asked students to provide written feedback on the **We the People...** program. Specifically, question 35 asks students to describe whether and how participating in the program increased their knowledge of democratic institutions. Almost 98% of students responding to this question noted that their knowledge of democratic institutions had increased as a result of their participation. Overwhelmingly, students offered very positive feedback, commenting that not only had their knowledge increased, but their desire to learn also grew. For instance, one student from Vermont remarked that, "**We the People...** has been one of the most incredible experiences for me. I definitely plan on studying politics or law in college and becoming highly involved in the workings of the government." A student from New York wrote,

"This program went a step beyond a basic understanding of democratic institutions and because of the competition; I developed a passion for our government." Finally, a Kansas student noted the benefits of the hands-on format of the **We the People…** program, noting that preparation for "the speeches and the questioning forced me to actually learn about the issues, rather than just know (memorize) enough to pass some tests."

Question 36 of our survey asked students whether participating in the program increased their support for democratic institutions and to describe their experience. Just over three quarters of all respondents agreed that the program helped increase their support of democratic institutions. A Hawaii student remarked, "[The program] has increased my faith in political institutions because I believe that any 'bad intention' is canceled out through checks and balances." An Indiana student wrote, "I have a better understanding and respect for the democratic institutions that this country is founded on." Comments from one-fourth of the students, whose support did not increase, reflected dissatisfaction with the current state of American democracy. For instance, some remarked that the knowledge they had gained from the program brought them to the realization that democracy is not working as well as it should. A student from South Dakota wrote, "Though I have learned more about [democratic institutions], I've also learned what they're supposed to be and it sickens me to learn what they've become." Another commented, "I support [democratic institutions], but only when they're not corrupt and are able to keep sight of the issue and not be blinded or influenced by interest groups and big money." Consequently, while the majority of **We the People…** students found participation in the program had increased their support of democratic institutions,

those whose support did not increase used knowledge they had gained from the program to justify their critical positions.

IX. Conclusion

This report was designed to measure political knowledge and support for democratic institutions and processes among students participating in the **We the People… The Citizen and the Constitution** program administered by the Center for Civic Education. Classes that compete in the programs national finals have received the most in-depth exposure to the materials. Therefore, these students were surveyed to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

Measures included here show that high school seniors who participate in the **We the People…** program are better informed across *every* aspect of political knowledge measured than national samples of high school seniors, college freshmen, and adults. Knowledge and skills gained through program participation both empower students and strengthen American democracy, which relies on at least a minimally informed public (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Furthermore, **We the People…** students are far less cynical about American politics and government than a corresponding national sample of high school seniors resulting their higher political participation. In contrast to college freshmen, participating students possess more active and engaged citizenship dispositions.

These findings, as well as students' own written feedback, suggest that participants in the **We the People…** program are more likely to support democratic processes and institutions or to supply reasoned and informed critiques thereof. The

evaluation further suggests that participants emerge better prepared for citizenship, with knowledge, skills and attitudes that are conducive to full participation in the American political process.

24

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